

3-20-2005

General Tilton and Togus Farm

Clark P. Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Thompson, Clark P., "General Tilton and Togus Farm" (2005). *Maine History Documents*. 11.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History Documents by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Gen. Tilton and Togus Farm

By Clark P. Thompson

All Rights Reserved

03/20/05

About everyone in Maine has heard of the Veterans Affairs (VA) Center at Togus near Augusta. But few are aware that it was once the home of a small but significant breeding farm for trotting horses. This facility started serving Civil War veterans in 1866 according to an internet history compiled by Timothy L. Smith, the author of Togus - Down in Maine (1998). It was then called "The National Asylum for Disabled Soldiers." The property was originally owned by Horace Beal of Rockland, a wealthy granite merchant according to Smith. When Beal learned that mineral springs were located on the property he seized upon a plan to build a Saratoga like spa. (It is interesting to note that the word "Togus" came from the word "Worromatogus" meaning "mineral water."). This history is confirmed, at least in part, by an article that appeared in the Maine Farmer on September 25, 1845, entitled "Saratoga of the East". The paper's editor noted: "Aside from the wonderful properties of the Spring, a handsome hotel, with suitable accommodations, would be a great place of resort in the warm season of the year; ... we see no good reason why Worromatogus might not be a place of resort for all the country round." A second article in the Farmer on August 12, 1847, stated in part: "There is a perfect rush to this spring, ... There are visitors from New York and Massachusetts, and all parts of Maine; ... Every thing is fitted up in good style". Beal invested heavily in the property building a large hotel, bathing house, racetrack and stables. After Beal died, the land and improvements were sold to the U. S. Government for a soldiers' home. The over mile long racetrack and stables were soon put to good use by the new Deputy Governor - Gen. William S. Tilton.

Gen. Tilton was born at Newburyport on February 1, 1828, and later served with the 22d Massachusetts Regiment coming home in the fall of 1864. At some point in his life, Gen. Tilton became interested in stock breeding. During his tenure at Togus which began in 1869, he was responsible for the cultivation of a large farm that grew crops to support the Soldiers Home. In addition, Tilton experimented with the breeding of dairy cattle and trotting horses. The trotting horses were his own while the cattle were probably owned by the Soldiers Home. In an article which appeared in the Maine Farmer on July 7, 1877, it was stated:

The governor of the Togus Home, Gen. W. S. Tilton, ... is extremely fond of livestock, and in the large barns there stand about thirty head of as fine Jersey and and Holstein cows as we ever saw, Mr. Tilton is a great lover of horseflesh, and he owns several of the best specimens there are in the State.

In 1879 W.E.S. Whitman authored a short history of the Togus Home which he dedicated to Gen. Tilton. See his History of the Eastern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. On page 54 he noted that the stables contained some "fine blooded

stock", mostly Hambletonian, like the bay stallion Constellation.

Like his friend George H. Bailey D.V.S. of Portland, he often corresponded with the Farmer on matters relating to the breeding and raising of trotting horses. One of his most important contributions came in 1872 when he submitted a detailed article (6/8) about Winthrop Messenger and his descendants. Winthrop Messenger was a son of imported Messenger that was brought to Winthrop by Alvin Hayward in the fall of 1819. The get of Winthrop Messenger were known for their trotting action and endurance so farmers interested in breeding a fast trotter or roadster were very much interested in this topic. The editor of the Farmer, Samuel L. Boardman, introduced Gen. Tilton thusly:

The compilation of this list of the descendants of Old Winthrop was undertaken merely as a labor of love, in the interest of true breeding - by Gen. W.S. Tilton, ... a gentleman who has a love for a good horse, who is himself a careful breeder, and one of our most intelligent and enthusiastic advocates of improved stock.

The editor went on to propose a plan whereby some of the confusion and difficulty in tracing pedigrees could be eliminated.

... to make the work of compiling the present history of Maine horses an easy task, comparatively, for future historians, we propose that breeders who know they are breeding from approved and promising strains of blood, record the births of colts and names claimed. Thus the publication of this Messenger memoir may lead to the putting in practice of this plan - a plan we deem of very great importance to Maine horse breeders.

To aid the implementation of this plan, the editor further offered:

... we will allow them (breeders), to insert names, and pedigrees of reasonable length, in the Maine Farmer, free of expense, only making one condition imperative, that is, that no name in use shall be applied to a new horse.

The editor then concluded:

We deem this memoir one of the most important contributions towards the agricultural history of our State that has ever been published; ...

For the next several years, the Farmer served as an unofficial central registry for trotting horses bred in Maine. It would be used by John W. Thompson of Canton to help compile the first Maine trotting registry in 1874, and also by John Wallace who published the first national trotting registry.

Meanwhile, back on the farm at Togus, Gen. Tilton was busy with his stallions and colts. One of the first stallions advertised for service was "Seboomook." He was a bay horse foaled in 1869, got by Ledo a son of the great Hambletonian out of the thoroughbred

mare Vistula. Unlike some breeders, Tilton believed it was important to have some thoroughbred blood in the pedigree of the trotting horse. Tilton won first premium with Seboomook at the Maine State Fair in Bangor (1872) for the class of stallions four years and under. Unfortunately, Seboomook's breeding career was short lived as he died in 1873 as a result of a farm accident. Despite this early setback, Tilton pressed on with two other stallions. His determination was reflected in a letter (2/15) which he penned to the Farmer as the new year (1873) dawned. His letter was written in response to the question of what benefit is it to breed a horse that can trot a fast mile.

They are material and moral. Material, in that gain in price which always awaits excellence in result. ... If, by an improvement in any direction, they can secure for their colts, as yearlings, double the price formerly to be had for them at three years of age, a benefit is certainly gained. ...

Among the moral benefits is the pleasure always derived from progress. The results of successful efforts are always incitive to new exertions in other directions. There is a just pride belonging to excellence acquired as a result of such exertions.

Gen. Tilton concluded his letter with a question.

If with sires possessing one half Messenger, and one half common blood, such progress has been made, so much wealth has been gained by the State - what may not be anticipated for the future, when we shall take advantage of the progress of our sister States and "breed up" by securing stallions which shall not only possess one-half Messenger blood, but shall unite with it the best thoroughbred strains that have come down to us from Herod and Eclipse?

In the spring of 1873 Tilton advertised the stallion "Slasher" and, later in 1874, the stallion "Sultan" for service at the Togus Farm. Slasher, a bay horse foaled in 1866, was a son of the popular Gen. Knox that once stood for Thomas S. Lang at North Vassalboro. The Knox horse had recently been sold to Fashion Farms in New Jersey, the home of Goldsmith Maid and other fast ones. Many farmers were looking to breed to sons of the old General, and Tilton tried to accommodate them. Slasher was a good campaigner and won many races under Tilton's supervision. Tilton was interested in various bloodlines and kept up on the latest developments in the breeding of trotters. Following the lead of some Kentucky breeders, Tilton acquired "Sultan," a grandson of the famous thoroughbred "Lexington," for stud service. Like his friend Bailey who was also a student of bloodlines, he felt it was important to the improvement of the breed to have some thoroughbred blood close up on the dam's side of the pedigree.

Once the new foals arrived on the ground, Tilton made sure they were "handled from their birth." In the winter of 1873 he wrote a letter (01/04) to the Farmer sharing his thoughts on feeding young horses.

I give colts as many oats as they can at once eat up clean, feeding three times a

day. Once a week they receive a warm mash, of bran and oats, and once a week they also have three or four pounds of potatoes; each in lieu of a usual feed. They would get other roots - preferably carrots - if I had them.

He further noted that his youngsters were exercised in a "large yard" and all two and three year olds were worked "upon the road." (This may have been a reference to the mile track which encircled the Soldiers Home.)

As time passed, Maine breeders turned to Kentucky to find new stallions for their breeding operations. Gen. Tilton was impressed with the Kentucky stallion Almont. Almont, a bay grandson of Hambletonian, was not for sale but his two year old son "Constellation" could be purchased for a reasonable sum. Constellation had a slow start in the stud at Togus Farm. He won many fair premiums for style and trotting action but little else. He was not a fast horse himself, and with a stud fee of "Fifty Dollars to Insure (a foal)", Maine farmers were slow to patronize him. In the fall of 1876 Tilton provided the Farmer with a "List of the Distinguished Progeny of Almont." Only one other breeder in Maine had a son of Almont in service - Gen. Withers was breeding mares at the stable of Greenville J. Shaw in Hartland. Perhaps Tilton was expressing his frustration a bit when he wrote (11/02) to the Farmer in the fall of 1878.

It matters not how high the price of service. Little men breed to little horses at Little prices, do they not also have little colts which sell for less than cost?

Tilton was a supporter of the fairs and used them to promote Constellation and his other stallions. For example, in 1880 he took out a full page ad in the Maine Horse Breeders Monthly advertising Constellation's pedigree. The ad further stated that Tilton would offer a \$100 premium at the 1881 State Fair for the best three foals (excluding his own) of Constellation. In 1879 he took Constellation to Worcester for an exhibition at the New England Fair. Gen. Withers, the man who sold Constellation to Tilton, was in attendance at this Fair as was Gen. Withers, the stallion, the other Maine owned son of Almont. Not everyone was so enthusiastic about horse racing at the fairs. On November 1, 1879, Tilton responded to a correspondent to the Farmer who charged the fairs with mismanagement because they encouraged trotting at the fairs.

Mr. Brackett reveals his whole animus in his next, ... that horse racing withdraws attention from other departments. This is true and nothing can be done about it, unless to change human nature. Men and women go to the fairs for recreation and amusement, more especially to see the races. Incidentally they look at the cattle, sheep and pigs, but their real interest is in the racing. They can see cows any day in their drives about the country, and can admire good butter and cheese and fruit in the nearest market. They don't care to pay money to see such things that interest only those who are concerned in producing them. But let them see a fairly conducted, evenly contested race, and they are filled with joy. They then have a sensation, a new sensation, which makes a pleasing variety to a humdrum life.

This undercurrent of opinion against trotting at the fairs was nothing new. It had existed for some time. These people believed that "horse trots" attracted gamblers, drinkers and other unsavory characters to the fairs. As one friend of temperance replied to Tilton, the horse trots were only a "mask to conceal the side shows" of gambling and drinking. Some Maine fairs did experiment with doing away with the "trots" but soon discovered the error of their ways. The trotting events were the single attraction that caused the turn out of large crowds. Trotting enthusiasts would not have to wait long to see a new trotting wonder from the Togus nursery.

In the March 27, 1880, issue of the Farmer it was noted that Gen. Tilton had just sold a two year old colt by Constellation to C.P. Drake of Lewiston. The colt's name was "Glenarm", and unlike his father, he showed early speed. In 1882 at the Maine State Fair in Lewiston Glenarm took a record of 2.39 ½, the fastest yet for a four year old in Maine. In 1883 Glenarm won the blue ribbon for stallions at the State Fair trotting a mile in 2.32 ½. Glenarm was placed in the stud of C. P. Drake and bred 65 mares in the season of 1885. In the fall of 1886 he trotted a mile over the Canton half mile oval in 2.26 ¼. Glenarm was on his way, and interest in Constellation was finally picking up a bit. Tilton's faith in Constellation had been rewarded. However, Constellation was now in the stable of H.E. Haley at Monroe. Tilton had by now retired from service at the Soldiers Home and needed to find a new home for his stallion. Togus Farm would continue but its heyday as a breeding nursery were over. After traveling abroad, Tilton relocated to Newtonville, Massachusetts. However, he kept many of his horses in Maine where he enjoyed much success with them in his later years. He also became active in the New England Colt Stakes serving as the President of the New England Trotting Horse Breeders Association and later in the National Trotting Association serving a term as its Vice President. On occasion, he also worked as a trotting horse Judge at the fairs as he did in 1884 at the Eastern Maine State Fair in Bangor.

In the fall of 1886 the editor of the Farmer reflected on Tilton in a column (10/21) entitled "Patient Waiting." It read in part as follows:

Gen. Wm. S. Tilton several years ago purchased in Kentucky, after very careful selection, Constellation, a son of the famous Almont, and brought this horse to Maine for the improvement of Maine horses. ... He had to meet with many difficulties. First, to overcome the prejudices of a large class of people who could see no virtue in pedigree, ... But the General knew that he was building upon a rock, and so patiently waited for his reward. This year has brought it full and ample, and it is now acknowledged on all hands that he has been a public benefactor, doing as much as any one man ever did for the improvement and benefit of the horses of this State. ... The people of Maine owe General Tilton a great deal for what he has done for this State, and we take great pleasure in chronicling his success, and to heartily congratulate him upon it.

General Tilton died in 1889. The editor of the Maine Horse Breeders' Monthly, John W. Thompson, remembered him fondly. In his April issue he stated:

We first came to know him personally and well, in 1873. ... During this time we visited him at his home, and had business dealings with him, and he was always the courteous gentleman, the upright and square dealing business man, and the sincere and unfaltering friend. He was a man of the most remarkable executive ability, and during his stay at Togus, he caused what was formerly a barren waste, to "blossom as the rose." ...

During his residences at Togus he probably did more to inaugurate the "era of improvement" in breeding the light harness horse, than any man within the borders of the State, ... We have not spoken of his early career, or his brilliant war record, but simply of the man as we knew him personally. And we shall miss him, for "take him all in all, we shall not look upon his like again."

(P.S. Notes: The author would like to hear from anyone who has additional information about Gen Tilton. The author hopes to establish a "Maine Trotting Horse Heritage Trail" which will highlight Togus Farm and other locations which played a significant role in developing the trotting horse breed in Maine. The author may be contacted at his email address - clark_price@msn.com)